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ABSTRACT

To determine whether negative or positive criticisms written on children's creative writing would affect the mean number of words and sentences produced, a study was conducted with 31 fourth grade children. The children were divided into two groups: those whose creative writing would receive negative comments and those whose writing would receive positive comments, regardless of the quality of writing. Some of the assignments were topics chosen by the teacher, while some were chosen by the individual students. In the first of eight 20-minute writing sessions, 24 of the subjects indicated that they liked creative writing, one indicated that he did not like it, and six indicated that they sometimes liked writing. These feelings remained essentially the same throughout the sessions. There were no statistically significant differences found in the number of words and sentences produced by the subjects, but the comments affected the subjects' self-esteem and feelings about writing. Those receiving negative comments, even after really attempting to improve their work, exhibited lower self-esteem, lack of pride in their work, and very tense body language, while those receiving positive comments were relaxed, smiling, and confident. (HTH)

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The Effects of Positive and Negative Comments on Children's Creative Writing

By

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Introduction

Creative writing has become an integral part of the language arts program of elementary schools. It is one of the most valuable language arts activities provided for children. Teachers attempt to encourage children to write creatively by employing various techniques. These frequently include many strategies: Listening to poems and stories, creating abstract arrangements as writing stimulators, and writing spontaneously as events occur. These experiences provide an opportunity for the child to communicate his beliefs, thoughts, and feelings in written form. They also contribute to the child's academic, social, and emotional growth.

The past two decades of research pertaining to creative writing has not been conclusive. There have been many opinions expressed by educators and creative writing authorities. There has been no definite evidence to support or refute the belief that positive or negative criticisms, the correcting or not correcting of writing mechanics tend to reduce the quality or quantity of children's compositions.

In 1963 an NCTE Committee composed of professors of English and educators found only one study in their research on the subject of

negative or positive criticisms and their effects on children's composition. Baddock (1963) sought to determine if the use of three different marking systems would affect the quality of children writing. Results of the study indicated that there were no significant differences between the quality of themes written by the sixth grade subjects. Bibberstine (1967) investigated teacher influences and their relationship to written composition of fourth graders. His findings revealed that negative comments did have an effect upon the pupils' writing ability, but positive comments lost their intended purpose when negative comments were overwhelming.

The 70's also produced little research pertaining to creative writing. Schroeder (1973) investigated the effects of the use of direct discourse, the use of a descriptive passage, the correct use of capital letters, and the correct use of terminal punctuation marks. He wished to determine the affect of positive and corrective reinforcement on the written compositions of fourth grade subjects. The results of his study indicated that both kinds of reinforcements were effective, but a higher performance level existed where corrective feedback was employed.

Since the 1963 NCTE commissioned research study concerning creative writing, a paucity of research continues. Writers offer many excellent suggestions for improving creative writing, but few definitive studies have been conducted. From the limited studies available, one could not state with confidence the affect of positive or negative criticisms on a child's creative writing productivity. Today, the conundrum continues unresolved.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this investigation was to determine whether or not negative criticisms or positive criticisms written on children's creative writing will affect the mean number of words and the mean number of sentences produced.

Subjects

The subjects fo this investigation were a class of 31 fourth grade children. There were 19 girls and 12 boys enrolled in the Marvin Pittman Laboratory School of Georgia Southern College. The Lorge Thorndike Intelligence Test yielded a Verbal Score of 99.4 and the average Non-verbal Score was 105. The total means I.Q. score for the group was 104. These scores fall within the average range.

Procedures

Using a table of random numbers, the 31 subjects were assigned to two groups or classes: (1) those whose creative writing would receive negative comments and (2) those whose writing would receive positive comments. There were 15 subjects assigned to the positive group and 16 assigned to the negative group. Regardless of the apparent quality of creativity or lack of such qualities, positive or negative comments were placed on the papers. The positive comments were written in blue ink and the negative comments were in red ink. The comments written on the papers were as follows:

Positive Comments	Negative Comments
Good work!	Poor work!
Excellent work!	Did you do your best?
That's great!	Is this your best work?
Super story!	Are you really trying?

You remembered to indent!	You forgot to indent!
Very neatly done!	Very poorly done!
You tried very hard!	You aren't really trying!
I like this work!	I don't like this!

Creative writing exercises or topics were of two types: (1) those supplied by the teacher and (2) those decided by each individual child. The topics supplied by the teacher were: How I Feel About Creative Writing, My Most Embarrassing Moment, One Night I Had a Dream, and When I Grow Up, I'd Like to Be . . . The other three topics varied widely as they were decided individually by each child. There were 8 writing sessions of 20 minutes each on alternate days. Prior to beginning a writing session, previous writings were returned, and the children were given time to read the comments on their papers.

Results of the Study

Based on the subjects' remarks on writing number one, 24 gave positive indications that they liked creative writing, 1 indicated that he did not like creative writing, and 6 indicated that they sometimes liked creative writing. The last writing indicated that 29 of the subjects liked creative writing and two students who had received negative comments on their writings disliked creative writing.

A T-test was used to determine if significant differences existed between the mean and standard deviations of words and sentences for the two groups on writing number eight. Tables 1 and 2 illustrate the means and standard deviations and F-value for the two groups.

Table 1

Means Number of Words and Standard Deviation for Word Written By Each Group

T-TEST

Groups	Number of Cases	Mean	Standard Deviation	F-Value
Positive Comments	15	69.40	35.01	1.19
Negative Comments	16	69.06	38.24	

Table 2

Means Number of Words and Standard Deviation for Sentences Written By Each Group

T-TEST

Groups	Number of Cases	Mean	Standard Deviation	F-Value
Positive Comments	15	6.53	3.14	1.84
Negative Comments	16	6.88	4.26	

Discussion

Evidence from this study indicates that the writing of positive or negative comments on children's papers does not have a significant effect on how they feel about creative writing. Their feelings regarding like or dislike of creative writing remained essentially the same. Positive or negative comments also did not affect the means and standard deviations of words and sentences produced by the subjects.

Even though statistically significant differences were not found, comments tended to have affected the subjects self-esteem and their feelings about their writing. Subjects receiving negative comments even after really attempting to improve their products, exhibited lower self-esteem and lack of pride in their work. A gifted student in the negative group wrote superb compositions but would hold them in such a position when returning so as to prevent his paper from being viewed by classmates. He seldom smiled when his papers were returned and made comments on his paper similar to, "I really tried today." One very slow student who received positive comments and wrote only two or three almost illegible sentences and/or phrases would beam with a radiant smile and hold his paper for everyone to view. He was very proud of his positive comments.

Facial expressions and body language of students indicated feelings toward compositions. As observed by the teacher, students receiving favorable comments consistently exhibited a relaxed body language. While those receiving negative comments consistently tended to tense their bodies and were characterized by unsmiling faces. The majority of students expressed verbally that they preferred having a topic given to them for composition rather than being required to chose their own.

The controversy of the affects of positive and negative comments on children writing has not been resolved. Perhaps other studies should use larger samples and the creative writings should be extended over a longer period of time. The personality of the teacher and her overt reactions toward a child's product may have a positive or negative effect on his composition. Instead of number of words and number of sentences as indicators of affect, more subjective measures of children's feelings toward creative writing may be more appropriate.

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